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ABSTRACT

This guide helps parents understand how schools assess their child's English language ability and suggests ways for them to help schools place their children in the most useful language program. All districts must decide which students to test, and then how to test them. Some schools attempt to find out the English skills of all students, and others simply place them and wait until language problems appear. Others fall between the two approaches, automatically assessing students in some categories. The most common assessment method is some kind of formal testing, such as language proficiency examinations, overall achievement testing, or both. Unfortunately, many states test only the ability to speak English, including the states that use the Language Assessment Scales. This instrument measures only a low level of language knowledge and does not determine the higher level needed for success in schools and employment. Parents can help the assessment process by: (1) providing schools with accurate information; (2) organizing centers for language minority students; and (3) requesting the use of several assessment methods. (SLD)

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for parents/about parents

**A GUIDE TO
ASSESSING AND
PLACING LANGUAGE
MINORITY STUDENTS**

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In 1974 the Supreme Court ("Lau v. Nichols") required schools to give students who speak and write very little English (called language minority, or Limited English Proficient, LEP students) an education that meets their language needs. The Court did not say how to do this, so districts across the country have very different programs: bilingual classes that use the student's native language less and less until only English is used, special English as a Second Language (ESL) classes where only English is taught, one-on-one tutoring, and/or classes where only English is used regardless of whether the students can understand it (called "immersion" classes).

Schools also have different ways of finding out—"assessing"—how well students know the English language in order to place them in the language program where they will improve their English and learn other subjects. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for schools to find out how much English a student knows, and they place many students in the wrong class.

This guide will help parents understand how schools assess their children's English language ability, and suggest ways for them to help schools place their children in the most useful language program.

School Language Education Policies

All districts must make two basic language assessment decisions: (1) identification of which students to test; and (2) the assessment methods. Identification and assessment methods are very different from state to state and even from school to school.

Decisions about where to place students are also often based on funding. After schools spend all the money they can

get for special programs, they may not be able to increase the number of students in them.

Identification

Some districts attempt to find out the English skills of all incoming students, others simply place students into classes and wait until language problems appear, and some districts fall in between. In New York City, for example, as the result of a lawsuit, all students with Hispanic surnames automatically are assessed for English skills, while others are assessed only if there is some reason to do so.

To decide whether a student's English language ability should be tested, schools often use information from (1) teachers, and (2) the Home Language Survey. The California Home Language Survey, which is supposed to be given to all incoming students, and is typical, asks four questions:

- What language did your child learn when he or she first began to talk?
- What language does your child mostly use at home?
- What language do you mostly use when speaking to your child?
- What language is most often spoken by the adults at home?

If the answer to any question is something other than English, the student must take an English language exam.

Assessment

Some districts make few, if any, formal assessments, while others do a great deal of testing. Most districts get information about a student's language skills from one or more of these places:

- teachers.
- parents, often in the form of a Home Language Survey.
- records from previous schools.

- evaluations of the student's total academic level.
- language tests.

The most common assessment method is some kind of formal testing, such as language proficiency exams, overall achievement tests, or both. No matter which method is used, placement is sometimes incorrect, mainly because there is no national agreement on how well a student can know English and still be categorized as Limited English Proficient.

Tests

Many different achievement and language tests are used to decide whether to place a student in special English language or special education programs. To be as accurate as possible, the tests should measure all the ways a student uses English or another language, including understanding, speaking, and writing.

Unfortunately, many states test only the ability to speak English, including those states using the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), the most common language test. This test measures only a low level of language knowledge, not the higher level that students need for success in schools and employment. Also, using only one test is not fair to students, because more testing is needed to find out their overall language ability.

How Parents Can Help Improve Assessments

Parents can help schools make the right decisions about their children's language learning in several ways.

Providing Schools with Accurate Information

Parents should provide schools with correct and complete information about

their children's knowledge of English and their native language. They should talk with school people about the Home Language Survey if they believe that just writing their answers will not give enough information. It is understandable that some parents (particularly those who are undocumented residents), whether because of fear, misunderstanding, or a wish to have their children placed in mainstream classrooms, might say that English is spoken at home even if it is not. However, parents should know that by answering questions truthfully, they are helping their children get a better education.

Parents should also find out what questions about language their children are asked. If it seems that the school is not finding out enough information to place their children in the right class, parents should give more information about their children's language abilities. Even if parents cannot speak English, they can tell someone that they want to speak with a teacher or counselor, and request an interpreter.

Organizing Centers for Language Minority Students

"Welcome Centers" help incoming LEP students at multicultural schools to be treated fairly, and they provide a hospitable setting for families. Centers are already open in some school districts (Philadelphia, among them), and parents can offer to set them up and help run them in their own district. Although local schools decide which families to invite to the center, a center has some control over how the language abilities of students are tested, and it can help parents give information to schools. Centers can also be a place for student health services and parent support.

Requesting the Use of Several Assessment Methods

Parents should urge schools to test all the ways that their children use language, and to use several kinds of tests, when deciding which language class is best for them. Schools should ask teachers for information because they often know the most about their students' abilities. Also, parents should not just answer the questions on the Home Language Survey; they should give as much information as they can about their children's language ability.

*This guide, by Wendy Schwartz, is based on **The Assessment and Placement of Language Minority Students**, a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a copy of the digest and a list of other Clearinghouse publications.*

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Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You can reach the NPIN World Wide Web at <http://ericps.ed.uiuc>, or the NPIN Gopher at <gopher://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu>. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

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